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Krüger, Thomas

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"AND THEY HAVE NO COMFORTER": JOB AND ECCLESIASTES IN DIALOGUE*

Thomas Krüger

1. Introduction

Intertextuality¹ is a rather broad concept. In a sense, all of our thinking is intertextual. It is shaped by oral or written texts that we remember consciously or unconsciously. And it translates into new oral or written texts that we produce. Or should I say, rather, that we are the vehicles by which texts reproduce, vary and evolve themselves? All authors work in a complex network of texts that shape their thoughts, enabling them to express themselves and challenging them to produce new texts. Authors assume that their readers know certain texts, so they can allude to these texts for a broad range of purposes, from recalling cultural knowledge to supporting their ideas to noting an opposing point of view. Readers may follow suggestions of this sort more or less strictly. If some time has elapsed between the production of a text and its reception, readers will probably no longer know all the texts the author knew. Instead, they will know other texts the author did not know. Some of these texts might have been influenced by the text in question. For biblical texts, the different canons of Jewish or Christian religious communities are intertextual networks. What a particular text says is not immediately important for the community but must be assessed in comparison with all other texts in their respective canons, as well as with extra-canonical texts, such as creeds or theological treatises. The latter is true at least of most religious communities. However, the fact that we know numerous texts in addition to the canons and classics of our respective traditions impacts our readings of the biblical texts, even if we try to focus only on their historical and canonical meanings.

* I would like to thank Sarah Shectman for improving my English and for her valuable comments on my work.

1. Compare, e.g., Carr 2012; Allen 2000.

In this study I will read and interpret several passages from Ecclesiastes in light of passages from Job, and vice versa.² I believe that these passages from Ecclesiastes were written with Job in mind and that the author wanted his readers to interpret these passages with an eye to Job. However, this is difficult to prove,³ and so I will confine myself to showing how a reading of Ecclesiastes in light of Job, and vice versa, may deepen our understanding of these passages and inspire reflections that may lead us beyond their contents and meanings.

2. Ecclesiastes 4:1–3

Let us begin with Eccl 4:1–3. The passage starts with an observation of widespread oppression: "And I returned and saw (or: I saw again?) all the oppressions that are done under the sun, and look: the tears of the oppressed, and they have no comforter (וְאֵין לָהֶם מְנַחֵם), and in (lit.: from) the hand (i.e., on the side?) of their oppressors there is power, and they have no comforter (וְאֵין לָהֶם מְנַחֵם)" (v. 1).⁴

That the oppressed have no one to comfort them—which would include not only consolatory words but also helpful deeds—makes their situation desperately hopeless. It is not clear whether humans alone are in view here as potential comforters or whether God is as well. This is the only occurrence of the root נחם and its derivatives in Ecclesiastes. In Job, however, the verb נחם, together with the nouns נחמה and הנחם, is a keyword.⁵ It frames the book, appearing in Job 2:11 and 42:11, which relate that Job's three friends and his brothers, sisters and acquaintances come to comfort Job, just as he used to comfort the mourners before his life was ruined by God (29:25). But the friends fail to comfort Job (16:2; 21:2, 34), even though they think they do (15:11). Instead, they rebuke Job with increasing intensity, thus pushing him to call on God—the very one who ruined Job's life and allows him to find no comfort in his sleep (7:13) or in his death (6:10). Eventually, God does speak to Job and Job says that he is comforted (42:6).

2. For a more detailed and comprehensive explanation of my understanding of these two books, compare Krüger 2004 and 2010.

3. However, there is a broad scholarly consensus that the so-called wisdom books of the Old Testament are part of a broader debate within Second Temple Judaism and that within this debate Ecclesiastes is by and large later than Job and takes the discussion further. Compare, e.g., Saur 2012.

4. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

5. Compare Krüger 2007.

Read with this sidelong glance at Job, Eccl 4:1 points to the fact that Job is not the only person without a comforter. Whereas he was eventually comforted and restored by God, the multitude of oppressed people are less lucky. Ecclesiastes 4:1 also throws a critical light on Job's claim that he delivered the poor who cried out (29:12), broke the jaws of the wicked (29:17), comforted the mourners (29:25), wept for those who were in trouble and grieved for the poor (30:25). Job himself admits that there were also people whom he would have disdained to put among his sheep dogs, because they had lost their vigour and thus were no longer of any use to him as workmen (30:1–2). Now, his life ruined, Job feels oppressed by God (10:3). This complex and inconsistent picture of Job creates doubt as to whether it is always as easy as Eccl 4:1 suggests to distinguish oppressors and oppressed, those who should be comforted and those who should comfort others.

Oppression (עָשָׂה and its derivatives) is another term shared by Ecclesiastes (4:1; 5:7; 7:7) and Job. In Job 10:3, Job asks God whether he considers it good to oppress people, to despise the work of his hands and to shine upon the counsel of the wicked. In Job 35:9, Elihu states that the oppressed cry for help but forget to praise God, their creator. Therefore, God does not listen to or answer them. Reading Eccl 4:1 with these two passages in mind, we may ask whether it is only humans who oppress others, failing to console them, or if it is not also (or perhaps even primarily) God.

Ecclesiastes 4:2–3 draws a conclusion from the preceding observation: “And I praised the dead, who have already died, more than (or: instead of) the living, who are still living, and more (lit.: better) than both of them (I praised him) who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work (i.e.: works or events?) that is done (or: happening) under the sun.”

This statement is reminiscent of Job's lament in Job 3.⁶ Here, Job curses the day of his birth, saying that it would have been best had he not been born (3:2–10) or had he died immediately after his birth (3:11–12). Now that he is alive, it would be better for him to die (cf. 6:8–10; 7:15–16; 13:15; 17:13–16), since all trouble comes to an end in the netherworld (3:13–19). Thus, Job presents a clear ranking: better to be dead than to be alive, and even better not to have been born at all.

6. This is noted by virtually every commentator. C. G. Bartholomew (2009, 186–87) rightly points out that there is no indication in this text that Ecclesiastes is less concerned about the oppressed than is Job, as is often alleged by commentators. Indeed, one might ask whether Job, by the end of the book, has forgotten his concern with the situation of the oppressed, so vehemently expressed in Job 24.

Ecclesiastes 4:2–3 expounds the same ranking, adding one small but important detail: the best is not to have *not* been born, but to have *not yet* been born. In other words, it is better to start one's life than to be finished with it. Or, as Eccl 9:4–6 has it:

For him who is joined (with *Qere*) to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better off than the dead lion. For the living know that they will die; but the dead don't know anything, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have already perished; they will never again have a share in anything done (i.e.: happening?) under the sun.

This text does not deny that life is full of trouble—at least for some people. But life is nevertheless better than death. This contradicts the lament in Job 3. However, in the course of Job's discussion with his friends, Job changes his former views on life and death. Thus, in chs. 14 and 17, Job paints a picture of the netherworld that is much grimmer and bleaker than the one in ch. 3. And by the end of the dialogue, Job wants not to die but to live and to be as he was before disaster befell him. Already in ch. 3 Job not only criticizes God, who gives humans a miserable life, but also people who cherish life in spite of the trouble it entails. They are fathering, bearing and fostering children or building houses and palaces. Even those who—according to Job—are longing for death do not kill themselves, just as Job does not. Obviously, their longing for death is not as strong as their desire to live. In sum, Eccl 4:2–3 may be read as a critical commentary on Job 3, reasoning in line with the book of Job as a whole.

3. Ecclesiastes 5:12–6:6

Let us now turn to a longer passage from Ecclesiastes, the reflections on wealth and poverty in 5:12–6:6. The passage may be subdivided into three parts. The first, 5:12–16, shows that poverty is bad because the poor lack the means for eating, drinking and enjoying life. The third part, 6:1–6, shows that wealth is worthless if the rich are not able to eat, to drink and to enjoy life. The middle part, 5:17–19, affirms that it is good for all humans to eat, to drink and to enjoy life, be it in recompense for their labour or made possible by their wealth.

Ecclesiastes 5:12–14 relates how a rich man lost all his wealth:

There is a sick (or: unique?) evil I have seen under the sun: riches kept by (or: for) their owner(s?) for his evil (i.e.: for bad times). Those riches perished by an evil business. He begot a son, and there was nothing (left)

7. So DCH 3:229, s.v. חָלִיָּהּ v.

in his hand. As he came forth from his mother's womb, naked he had to return, to go as he came, and he could not take anything for his labour, which he could carry away in his hand.

There is a shot of irony in this story. A man saved his wealth for bad times—but the bad times brought about the loss of his wealth. Now he has nothing left and cannot bequeath anything to his son. This loss is evil, but even more evil are its consequences, depicted in vv. 15–16: “This also is a sick (or: unique?) evil: just as he (or: one) came, so shall he (or: one) shall go. And what profit has he that labours for the wind? All his days also he eats in darkness, and he has much sorrow and sickness and wrath.”

Having lost all his wealth, the former rich man (as well as his son) has no means to enjoy life. He has to live like every poor man who “labours for the wind.” But because he saved his wealth for bad times, he was already living in this manner when he was rich. Thus wealth makes enjoyment possible but does not guarantee it. It is not wealth that makes people happy but enjoyment, which is made possible by wealth. A rich man who does not enjoy his wealth has no better life than a poor person.

The repeated statement that the rich man who has lost his wealth has to go (as naked) as he came is reminiscent of Job's dictum in Job 1:21: “Naked I came out of my mother's womb, / and naked I shall return there. / The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; / blessed be the name of the LORD.” This does not mean that Job does not consider the disaster that has befallen him to be something evil. Indeed, Job 2:10 spells out the contrary: “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, / and shall we not receive evil?” Thus, Job and Ecclesiastes agree that a man's loss of his wealth is something evil.

Furthermore, for Job as for Ecclesiastes, a part of this evil is that one cannot eat, drink and enjoy life.⁸ Sorrow, sickness and wrath, which characterize the life of the poverty-stricken in Ecclesiastes, are also characteristic of the impoverished Job, even if only one of the Hebrew words used for these in Ecclesiastes, כָּעֵם, also occurs in Job.⁹ However, equally or perhaps more agonizing for Job is his understanding that the loss of his wealth (and his health) is a judgment by God in which he is misrepresented as a wrongdoer.¹⁰ This aspect is completely absent from

8. Compare Job 3:24; 6:7–8; 7:2–6, 13–15; 9:25–28; 16:15–16; 17:7 and others.

9. See Job 5:2; 6:2; 10:17; 17:7.

10. Compare particularly Job 16:7–8: “Surely now God has worn me out; ‘he has’ made desolate all my company. And ‘he has’ shriveled me up, which is a witness against me; and my leanness has risen up against me, it testifies to my face” (RSV).

the narrative of Eccl 5:12–16 (and from Job 1–2). However, in the course of the book of Job, Job learns that misfortune is not (or at least is not always) a sign of divine disapprobation.¹¹ Thus Ecclesiastes agrees with the book of Job in this respect as well. Read from the perspective of Ecclesiastes, the book of Job may be understood as a confirmation of the insight that the worth of wealth consists in enabling people to eat, drink and enjoy, even if it does not expressly state this insight.

Ecclesiastes 6:1–6 corroborates this conclusion with another case study: if a man holds riches, wealth and honour, but is not able to enjoy his life, a miscarried fetus would be better off than he—even if he would live two thousand years before he dies. From this text's point of view, wealth and honour, many children and a long life (even an eternal life?) are valuable not in themselves but only in that they may enable people to eat, to drink and to enjoy life. This can be read as a clarification of the end of the book of Job, which relates that Job became wealthy again, had many children and grew very old before he died. All these good things have only a relative worth. The crucial point is that Job is once again able to enjoy all of them. This is well in line with the book of Job as a whole, even if it is not very clearly stated there. But it is implied in the comparison with a miscarried fetus found in Eccl 6:3 and in Job 3:16. Job would rather be a miscarried fetus than a living person because a miscarried fetus has not seen trouble (עָמַל, Job 3:10). Thus, for Job, growing old, with many children and great riches, appears to be valuable only if one is free of trouble. Ecclesiastes is a bit more modest. For Qoheleth, trouble (עָמַל) is a part of life. In that respect he agrees with what Eliphaz says in Job 5:7: “man is born to trouble” (אָדָם לְעָמַל יוֹלֵד). What makes life good is not freedom from trouble but the possibility of eating, drinking and enjoying life alongside, or despite, one's trouble. Wealth and honour, a great family and a long life can help people to achieve this goal, but they cannot guarantee it. This is what gives these things relative value.

In contrast to the negative examples in 5:12–16 and 6:1–6, Eccl 5:17–19 says that it is good to eat, to drink and to enjoy good things alongside, or despite, one's labour (or: in return for one's labour, depending on the interpretation of the preposition בְּ in בְּעָמְלוֹ) and that it is a gift of God for a rich man to be able to enjoy his wealth,

For he will not much think about the days of his life, when God answers (or: keeps <him> occupied?, or: provides <him>?) with the joy of his heart. (v. 19)

11. This appears to be the main lesson of God's speeches at the end of the book. Compare also Job 42:7–9.

If in the last sentence the verb ענה means “to answer,”¹² it could be read as an allusion to Job 33:13–30, where Elihu explains to Job that God may answer humans in dreams and visions but also by letting them experience pain and sickness. Ecclesiastes 5:19 would then contradict Elihu, claiming that God answers not by letting people suffer but by letting them rejoice.¹³ If we prefer to emend the text, following the ancient versions (compare *BHQ*), then the passage notes that people tend to think about the limitations and the downsides of life when things are going badly for them but not so much when they are doing well. Job is a good example of just such a phenomenon.

4. Ecclesiastes 6:10

Ecclesiastes 6:10 makes a clear statement about the human condition: “That which has been was named long ago, and it is known what man is and that he cannot argue with him who is mightier than he.” The first clause may refer to the creation of all things—including humans—by God, at which point he also determined the distinctive quality of every creature—including humanity. But it may also be no more than a reminder that there is nothing new under the sun (cf. Eccl 1:9; 3:15), so that history teaches what is possible in the present and in the future. The second clause affirms that what the first says is also true for humanity. This is illustrated by the third clause in reference to the limits of the human ability to argue with God (who appears to be the one who is mightier than humans). So, what the text wants to say is that humans have to accept their natural (or creational) limits in relation to God—as they would have to accept their social limits according to Sir 8:1: “Do not contend with a powerful man, lest you fall into his hands” (RSV).

Ecclesiastes 6:10 is reminiscent of the discussion between Job and his friends as to whether Job can argue before God that he was innocent and did not deserve such calamity.¹⁴ Job knows from the outset that it is impossible to put God on trial:

...how can a man be just before God? If one wished to contend with him, one could not answer him once in a thousand times. He is wise in heart, and mighty in strength—who has hardened himself against him, and succeeded? (Job 9:2–4 RSV)

12. Compare Lohfink 1990; Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004, 341–42.

13. So Levy 1912, 99.

14. This connection is noted, e.g., by L. Schwienhorst-Schönberger (2004, 364), who points to Job 9:4, 12, 19, 32 (as well as Jer 12:1; 20:7).

Nevertheless, Job tries to achieve the impossible, culminating in his final speech in Job 31. And God eventually accepts the challenge, speaking to Job out of the whirlwind. The message of this final part of the book of Job is far from clear and is perhaps even self-contradictory.¹⁵ God demonstrates that Job cannot argue with him. But he also admits that Job is right and his friends are wrong. Finally, he restores Job, doubling his wealth—like a thief who has to pay back double what he has stolen (Exod 22:3). Thus, according to the book of Job it is true that humans cannot argue with God, but this is only part of the truth—and arguing is always worth a try. Accordingly, Eccl 6:10 may be understood as a restatement of an opinion that is criticized by the book of Job.

However, Eccl 6:10 may also be read as a clarification of another possible understanding of Job’s message. When Job finally gets his health and his wealth back, it is not an endorsement of his claim against God but rather a kind of *ex gratia* payment, perhaps occasioned by the special circumstances of his case. As Job states in his last speech, 42:1–6, he understands that his charges against God were wrong, since he misunderstood his calamity as a sign of divine disfavour. In line with this, Ecclesiastes advises his readers to accept misfortune as a part of the human condition: “On a good day enjoy good things, and on a bad day consider that God has made the one as well as the other” (Eccl 7:14).

5. Ecclesiastes 7:15–20

Accepting misfortune as a part of human life is probably easier for Qoheleth than for Job, since Ecclesiastes has a less positive picture of human morality. The book of Job leaves no doubt—at least for its readers—that Job is righteous and innocent, “blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1 RSV). In the view of Ecclesiastes, in contrast, “surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (Eccl 7:20 RSV). This view is widespread in the ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible (cf., e.g., 1 Kgs 8:46; Pss 14:1; 53:2; 143:2). Job and his friends also agree that nobody is perfect:¹⁶ “Can a mortal be righteous before God? Can a man be pure before his Maker?” (Eliphaz—Job 4:17 RSV; cf. 15:14; 25:4). “How can a mortal be just before God?” (Job—Job 9:2; cf. 14:4).

15. See Dell 1991, 184–212.

16. Compare Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004, 391.

Whereas Eccl 7:20 seems to argue that humans cannot be righteous, Eccl 7:29 apparently says that they could be righteous if only they wanted to be: “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes” (NKJV). Be that as it may, Ecclesiastes makes it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a case of completely undeserved misfortune, as is related in Job.

However, Qoheleth appears to relate comparable cases himself. For example, in Eccl 7:15 we read: “I have seen everything in the days of my futility (i.e.: during my futile life): there is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs (his life) in his maliciousness.” From this, Ecclesiastes draws the lesson: “Be not righteous overmuch, nor pretend to be wise excessively! Why do you want to ruin yourself? Be not wicked overmuch, nor be foolish! Why do you want to die when it is not your time? It is good that you hold on to this. But also from that do not withdraw your hand! Who fears God will avoid both” (vv. 16–18).

Job is a good example of “a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness,” since he suffers not *although* he was righteous but rather *because* he was righteous, as we know from the prologue. In view of Job’s fate, Ecclesiastes’ warning, often perceived as cynical, makes sense: “Be not righteous overmuch...! Why do you want to ruin yourself?” In view of the insight in Eccl 7:20 that no human being is completely righteous, this warning is not cynical at all but rather realistic. Like the parallel *וְהָיָה כְּחֵכֶם יוֹתֵר*, which means to pretend to be wise excessively (or: to pretend to be exceedingly wise?), *וְהָיָה צְדִיק הַרְבֵּה* in the present context can mean only to pretend to be righteous overmuch (or: to pretend to be extremely righteous)—in other words, to be self-righteous.¹⁷ Humans can only try to be as righteous as they are able to be or as little wicked as is possible for them. Those who fear God know that they are not perfectly righteous or wise.¹⁸ If all this is true, it pulls the rug out from under the book of Job.¹⁹

17. Bartholomew (2009, 255), following Longman (1998, 195), argues against this understanding; compare also Fox 2004, 48–49. But even then, “Koheleth is not advocating [wickedness] but rather accepting its inevitability: all humans are inescapably flawed (7:20), but can at least avoid being *very* wicked” (49).

18. M. Sneed (2012, 186–87; cf. 2003) points out that Eccl 8:10–13 distinguishes between being righteous and fearing God. The same is true for Eccl 7:15–18.

19. At least from under its prologue, which stresses that Job is perfectly righteous *and* God-fearing (Job 1:1, 9; 2:3).

6. Ecclesiastes 8:10–15

However, Ecclesiastes does not deny that the distinction between righteous and wicked people makes sense—as long as it is understood not as a qualitative but as a quantitative difference. So, Qoheleth relates that he “saw wicked men buried, and they came (to their rest?). And those who had done right had to go away from the holy place and were forgotten in the city. This also is futile” (Eccl 8:10).

The Hebrew text is difficult to understand precisely, but it appears to refer to the incongruity between people’s moral qualities and their fortunes. This incongruity encourages people to act wickedly, as Eccl 8:11–12a states: “Because the sentence against evil conduct is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of man is fully set in them to do evil, because a sinner does evil a hundred (times) and prolongs (his life).”

The text does not reveal who is responsible for the delay in judgment and punishment. Ecclesiastes 8:9 speaks of bad human governance. But it may also be God who does not speedily execute the sentence against evil conduct. Job repeatedly makes this complaint in the dialogue with his friends: “Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?” (Job 21:7 RSV; cf. 12:6; 21:17–21, 29–33; 24:1).

Ecclesiastes 6:11–12a sound like a summary of these complaints.²⁰ What follows in vv. 12b–13 appears to be the exact opposite and therefore is frequently regarded as a secondary, “orthodox” addition or—more plausibly—as someone else’s opinion, “quoted” by Ecclesiastes and refuted in v. 14:

But I also know that it will be good for those who fear God that (or: when) they fear him. And it will not be good for the wicked man and (it, or: he?) will not prolong (his) days (which are) like a shadow that (or: when) he does not fear God. There is a futile thing that is done (i.e.: happens?) on earth: that there are righteous men, to whom it happens according to the conduct of the wicked, and there are wicked men, to whom it happens according to the conduct of the righteous. I said that this also is futile.

However, vv. 12b–13 may also—and in a way more fitting to its context—be understood in the sense that the fear of God is not a means to an end, namely, to prosperity and longevity, but an end in itself: it is good for those who fear God that they fear him.²¹ And it is not good for

20. Compare Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2004, 429.

21. Compare Birnbaum and Schwienhorst-Schönberger 2012, 199. In Ecclesiastes, the Hebrew phrase *טוֹב לְX* (+ *וְיָהּ*) never means “it goes well with X” but always “it is good for X”; compare Eccl 2:3; 6:12; 8:15; 11:7.

the wicked that they do not fear God. (And all of them will live no longer than a shadow.) If this is what Ecclesiastes wants to say, then he is simply taking seriously the premise of Yahweh's conversation with the *satan* in Job 1–2: people should fear God for naught—if need be.

However, like the book of Job, Ecclesiastes does not think that people who fear God should seek out affliction—thinking, as Ps 34:20 has it, that the righteous must have many afflictions. Rather, they should accept and enjoy what God gives them—not as a reward but as a gift: “And I commend enjoyment, for man has no good thing under the sun but to eat and drink and enjoy, for this will accompany him in his toil through the days of life which God gives him under the sun” (Eccl 8:15).

7. Conclusion

Looking back to the passages discussed above, it is my impression that the author of Ecclesiastes not only had the book of Job in mind when he wrote his book, but also wrote for readers who knew the book of Job fairly well and were able to associate texts, ideas and discussions from the book of Job with what they read in Ecclesiastes. In the course of this, Job served neither as a consistent authority for the author of Ecclesiastes, nor as a foil for his critique, but rather was used freely and in different ways as an aid for developing and examining his own ideas—as were texts such as the Primeval History (Gen 1–11). However, all this is difficult to prove. So, I will confine myself to the conclusion that reading Ecclesiastes intertextually, with a sidelong glance at Job, is worth the trouble, as it helps us to understand more precisely the reasoning of particular texts and allows us to catch a glimpse of the highly sophisticated debates and discussions which were the context in which the books of Job and Ecclesiastes were written and to which they were intended to contribute.²²

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22. Compare Saur 2011.

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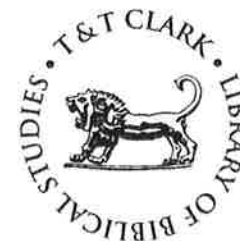
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Francesca Stavrakopoulou, Daniel L. Smith-Christopher



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READING ECCLESIASTES INTERTEXTUALLY



Edited by

Katharine Dell

and

Will Kynes

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